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Master Criminal Aids U.S., But Treads Thin Line Between Death, Deportation

By BOB CONSIDINE

NEW YORK — (NS) — Crime, like politics, makes strange bedfellows.

But the most extraordinary association in the annals of crime is the carefully-guarded relationship between the federal government and one of the most amazing underworld figures of the age.

He is a mystery man who chooses to call himself, at times, Pierre Lafitte and claims he is a descendant of the notorious 19th century smuggler and pirate, Jean Lafitte.

Now following one of the most dangerous of all occupations—that of the professional informer—Lafitte is balancing precariously on a razor-sharp edge between death and deportation.

THE FULL STORY of this man, of the exploits that federal officials describe as "fantastic," has been pieced together by International News Service through painstaking investigation and research.

Lafitte, the federal government has said, "is considered to be one of the leading criminals in the United States." His score or more of aliases stain police blotters in New York and other cities and in France, Belgium and North Africa.

Yet the government has publicly acknowledged the "assistance furnished" by Lafitte. He is employed now as an undercover man for law enforcement agencies in various parts of the nation.

This dapper-looking man is 5 feet, 9 inches tall, weighs 150 pounds and has thinning brown hair and cold blue eyes. He has been used as an undercover agent not only by federal and city investigating agencies, but by private individuals as well. An executive of one agency which employed Lafitte declared:

"AS A RESULT of his work, hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of jewelry, paintings and furs have been recovered and at least 15 desperate criminals have gone to jail."

As a criminal who twice illegally entered the United States, Lafitte is under a deportation order that could be executed whenever the federal government feels like it—whenever his usefulness ends.

Bit by bit that usefulness must lessen as he becomes better known in the underworld.

This man of many faces and aliases was arrested at least 34 times in 34 years, convicted 20 times and given sentences totaling 14 years. For some unexplained reason, Lafitte never served much time in prison.

Lafitte first came to police attention in 1921, after entering the country as a deserting seaman, when he was arrested in New York on a petty larceny charge. He was convicted and sent to the reformatory, but 32 years later that verdict was vacated on the grounds Lafitte could not speak English and was not aware of the nature of the charge to which he pleaded guilty.

LAFITTE, whose true name the government says is Jacques Voignier, said Voignir, was deported back to his native France Aug. 21, 1921.

Then, the federal government said, he launched a crime career that surmounted national boundaries and water barriers.

A United States attorney said during the deportation hearings that Lafitte was convicted "on at least 15 occasions in France between 1924 and 1935 of crimes involving theft, embezzlement, fraud, false identity, military desertion, unauthorized wearing of a decoration, passing of a worthless check and customs violation."

PIERRE LAFITTE
Police photo taken in 1947

The federal government said Lafitte returned to the United States about 1937 in some unknown manner, and although arrested on a number of charges "has managed to evade conviction for many crimes which the police authorities are satisfied have been committed by him."

To keep free of the law, when he could, Lafitte used at least 20 different aliases, according to the federal government.

HE TOOK the name Lafitte from a salesman he met in 1941 in New Orleans, La.

The record of Lafitte's 30 years as an international criminal led to his being sent to Ellis island in 1951 for deportation.

There he met Joe Orsini, a French thug who with the aid of Mafia operators in Italy and New York had risen to the head of a three-million-dollar-a-year dope ring.

Orsini was at Ellis island not as a dope king but as a French sailor charged with illegal entry.

Orsini paid Lafitte a visit, and in the ensuing conversation told Lafitte of the fantastic dope traffic which had made him rich.

But, he mourned, all was over now. He had been picked up before he could issue proper commands to the mob.

Lafitte nonchalantly said he would be happy to drop into the city and take with him any messages, plans and orders.

HE SAID bail was being arranged for him and that he would be free in short order.

That night Pierre Lafitte went to work for the federal government.

He bet his life that he could go into the dope ring as Orsini's intermediary and crack it. The federal bureau of narcotics was instantly interested.

And off he went, this time as Jean Labadie. Orsini gave him volumes of credentials.

Lafitte calmly, coldly learned all there was about the vicious business, acted like a boss and just wasn't around one night when the law closed in.

THE NEXT the mob saw of him was in court where he pointed them out—one by one. The ring was broken.

Orsini got 10 years, and 18 other members of the ring also were sentenced to prison.

A slightly less risky business was Lafitte's connection with a ring of art thieves.

Lafitte, this time posing as Gus Manuletti, a ship's steward (and working with the federal bureau of investigation), let it be known he was in the market for paintings to take back to Europe with him.

He was contacted by Norton Kretske, former attorney who was a suspect in the $600,000 theft of paintings from St. Joseph's Catholic church at Bardstown, Ky., in February 1952.

Kretske asked $100,000 for the paintings. Lafitte—"Manuletti"—argued the price down to $40,000 and arranged to pick them up.

THE FBI was waiting when he and Kretske arrived to get the paintings. Kretske was sentenced to six years in prison.

Lafitte's reputation on this job led later to the recovery of a $200,000 collection of art and antiques taken from the Kenosha, Wis., home of Oscar U. Zerk.

Posing as an underworld fence again, Lafitte made contact with the gang and managed to inspect the loot twice in a Melrose Park, Ill., office building. There were more than 100 pieces of silverwork, paintings and other valuable objects of art.

Lafitte made a "deal," arranged to accept delivery and told the FBI. Three men were arrested at the appointed rendezvous.

Nick George Montos, described by the FBI as "one of the most notorious burglars and safecrackers in the country" and who graced the FBI "10 most-wanted" list, was sentenced to seven years; James (Cowboy) Mirro was given three and Americo de Pietto got four and one-half.

WITH HIS record of service to the forces of law and order, Lafitte filed an appeal with the board of immigration appeals in Washington attempting to have the deportation order set aside.

The appeals board refused to reopen the case, but it took note of his work.

Lafitte went back to work as an informer and undercover agent desperately attempting to maintain his usefulness to the United States and ward off deportation. But he also had time for a private job or two.

HIRED by a Las Vegas, Nev., newspaper owner, Hank Greenspun, to provide him with the facts Greenspun needed in defense of a $1,000,000 libel suit, Lafitte arrived in that gambling haven last October.

This time he posed as Louis Tabet, Italian gangster from the east, come to Las Vegas first to buy into Roxie's $1,000,000-a-year bordello and then to buy the Las Vegas Sun and a gambling casino.

The name Tabet was one he collected in Chicago. Posing as a fence, he had wormed his way into the confidence of Arthur (Fish) Johnston, who boasted he could supply any kind of stolen item, in quantity, from tacks to minks. Lafitte provided the FBI with information that led to raids on Johnston's warehouses. Johnston and a henchman, Joseph Tabet, pleaded guilty and were sentenced to prison. As usual, Lafitte lived his new role in Las Vegas to the hilt.

WHEN he hires out as an informer or undercover agent, he wants no interference from his employer. He wants to be on his own, have an unlimited expense account, and handle things his own way.

Thus he put up at the El Rancho Vegas in real style and soon had the boys babbling into his hidden microphones.

The information Lafitte picked up in this way showed the tie-up between certain Las Vegas and Nevada officials and crime and prostitution in general.

Again Lafitte left town, and again he left behind him an amazed collection of erstwhile "associates."

Lafitte is at work now. His work is danger itself. But Lafitte is determined to remain in the United States, even at the risk of death.

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